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A STUDY OF THE COMMON MISTAKES IN PUPILS' ORAL ENGLISH

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For years formal grammar has been an important subject in the curriculum of most schools. In the belief that conditions at present are such as to entitle it to a less important place than it now occupies, an investigation was undertaken to determine the errors of speech made by the Cincinnati school children, how frequently those errors were made, to what extent formal grammar might be made of assistance in overcoming them, and to what extent the formal grammar now studied provides for errors not made by Cincinnati children.

The teachers from the third through the eighth grades were asked by the Superintendent of Schools to record all the errors noticed in the oral language of their pupils from November 15 to 19, 1915, inclusive, and to note the number of times each error was made. The records were collected and turned over to those in charge of the investigation, to be systematized and worked over into a report on conditions existing among Cincinnati school children.

A preliminary examination of all the reports showed that children in the same district but in different schools made exactly the same errors in practically the same proportion. To tabulate the errors made by all the children would have been a stupendous task. To bring the work within bounds, certain schools, considered representative of conditions in the various parts of the city, were selected, and their reports tabulated. The tables and conclusions offered are based on the reports from the schools so selected. Reports from a total of 1,387 children were used. Those in charge of the investigation feel that the figures offered are reliable only for the more glaring errors such as "I seen," "them books," etc.

Wherever the teacher herself was not sensitive to the finer distinctions, such as "May I" for "Can I," "I shall" for "I will," such errors were not reported. Naturally, the figures in this report include only such material as was collected.

Table I gives the names of the schools reports from which were used in the investigation, and also the number of pupils observed in each grade.

TABLE I
NUMBER OF PUPILS OBSERVED FOR ERRORS IN ORAL ENGLISH,
NOVEMBER 15 TO 19, 1915

Schools	Grades					
	3	4	5	6	7	8
Webster.....	40	31	50	43	.....	.....
McKinley.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	45	46
Garfield.....	44	36	38	.....	32	.....
Washington.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	68
Vine St.....	.....	.....	.....	28	.....	.....
28th Dist.....	.....	38	.....	.....	.....	.....
Columbian.....	38	.....	.....	35	33	53
30th Dist.....	.....	40	54	.....	.....	.....
N. Fairmount.....	.....	.....	.....	37	.....	.....
Chase.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	51	.....
Hyde Park.....	.....	33	44	48	.....	.....
Clifton.....	44	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Mt. Washington.....	13	.....	.....	.....	29	17
Pleasant Ridge.....	50	48	.....	35	44	.....
Linwood.....	.....	.....	45	.....	.....	39
Anderson's Ferry Colony.....	.....	5	.....	4	.....	.....
Total number of pupils for each grade.....	229	231	231	230	234	223

Table II gives a classification of all the errors made, the specific error in each classification, the number of times that error was noted in each grade, and the total number of times it occurred among the 1,378 children observed.

Thus, in the case of wrong verbs, "ain't," instead of "hasn't" or "haven't" was used 34 times by third-grade children, and 124 times by children of the upper grades.

TABLE II

ORAL ERRORS

Showing number of times each Error was made—Arranged according to parts of speech

VERBS	GRADES						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
<i>Wrong verb:</i>							
learn, for teach	47	17	3	1	3		71
can, for may	42		2	15	3		60
got, for receive, have, become, grow, is	9	27	4		6	7	53
leave, for let	2	9	10	12		1	34
lay, for lie		11	5		3	2	21
make (dinner), for prepare, get set, for sit	10	10				1	21
lend, for borrow		4	3			3	10
laid, for lay		5				1	6
		1				1	2
<i>Impossible tense form:</i>							
ain't, for am not, isn't, aren't.	34	17	15	20	14	24	124
ain't, for hasn't, haven't	31	19	5	23	1	10	89
drawed, throwed, growed, knowed, etc.	14	7	3		3		27
et, for ate	9	2					11
boughten, tooken	3	3		2			8
sawn, for saw	6						6
busted,			1	2		2	5
snuck, clumb	1	3	1				5
brung		3					3
durst	3						3
attackted					3		3
suspicion, for suspect				1			1
<i>Perfect participle for past tense and reverse:</i>							
seen, had saw	67	45	18	22	13	15	180
done	21	20	14	15	20	17	113
went	19	4		2	3	4	32
broke	16		3		3		22
begun, rung		1		3	1	4	9
took			5			2	7
wrote			1	1	1		3
have came, have became			1		1		2
<i>Wrong tense—present for past:</i>							
come		16	5	7		3	31
says			6	14			20
run		10			1		11
give		1	1				2
<i>Use of verb for noun:</i>							
That doesn't hurt, for make any difference	8						8
<i>Wrong sequence:</i>							
I have stayed at home and had done my work						2	2
would run, for ran						1	1
doing dishes and help cook						1	1

TABLE II (Continued)

VERBS	GRADES						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
<i>Incorrect use of mood:</i>							
if it was not for you, for were not.		5					5
<i>Failure of verb to agree with subject in number:</i>							
is.	30	25	2	9	2	8	76
don't.		6	5	6	19		36
PRONOUNS							
<i>First personal pronoun standing first in series:</i>							
I and my brother.	50	42	1	3			96
<i>Accusative pronoun for subject:</i>							
Frank and me.	54	6	4	3	1	2	80
<i>Pronoun for demonstrative Adjective:</i>							
them, for these.	18	9	8	6	13	21	75
<i>Predicate nominative not in nominative case:</i>							
It was me.		1	1	3	14	17	36
<i>Wrong pronoun:</i>							
that, which, for who, whose. ...	12				1	1	14
<i>Object of verb or preposition not in objective case:</i>							
I know who he saw, with George and I.		2	1	3		1	7
<i>Failure of pronoun to agree with antecedent in number:</i>							
Each of them took their guns.				3		1	4
<i>Pronoun for adverb:</i>							
They are two pens lying, etc.					1		1
<i>Wrong form of pronoun:</i>							
hissself, his'n.		1		1			2
ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS							
<i>Confusion of adjective and adverb:</i>							
That there.	4		3	11	19	1	38
quick, etc., for quickly.	1			1		3	5
awful, for very.				1	1	2	4
good, for well.						1	1
<i>Wrong article:</i>							
a for an.		2					2
<i>Misuse of adjective:</i>							
funny, lots, etc., for queer, many.	8			3			11
<i>Double comparison:</i>							
more stronger, worser, for stronger, worse.	1			1			2
<i>Wrong comparison:</i>							
gooder.	1						1
<i>Superlative for comparative:</i>							
largest.	3		2	2		1	8
<i>Misuse of adverb:</i>							
awfully, for very, dreadfully.						3	3

TABLE II (Continued)

PREPOSITIONS	GRADES						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
<i>Confusion of preposition and conjunction:</i>							
He does it like she does.....				5	10		15
<i>Wrong preposition:</i>							
by my aunt's.....	10	13	1	3		1	28
by us, for near us.....	16						16
in back of.....	3		3	4		2	12
would of, had a, for would have had to.....	1	3		1		2	7
get some paper off her.....				4			4
stays to home, different to.....						2	2
find fault of.....		1					1
upon Monday.....						1	1
NEGATIVES							
Haven't no, for haven't any...	91	31	38	12	29	32	233
Never gave.....	6		7	9	8		30
AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSIONS							
A hand and an arm with a sword in it.....		1					1
SYNTACTICAL REDUNDANCE							
got (in ain't got, haven't got)..	36	21	1	26	11	17	112
my mother she.....	13	7	24	4	7	3	58
all two, all both.....	19						19
and, so, at beginning of sentence.....							
why, in middle of sentence.....					15		15
for to keep, Where are you at?		1		3	1	2	7
he says, says he.....					3		3
those there.....					3		3
yet (I have seen her twice yet)				2			2
they went and took.....			1				1
MISPRONUNCIATIONS							
git, jist, kin, ketch, etc.....	67	7	5	10		2	91
somepin, for something.....	25						25
readin', nothin', etc.....	18						18
onct.....		12					12
liberry, pitcher, for picture.....		7		1			8
youse.....		7		1			8
scart, for scared.....	5			1			6
wen, wich.....	6						6
viadock, for viaduct.....	3						3
hunderd, childern, for hundred, children.....	3						3
futher, for further.....		1		1			2
haf, for have.....						1	1
perty.....						1	1

In Table III, all the errors made 10 times or more are arranged in the order of frequency. For instance, among all the children

TABLE III

MOST COMMON ERRORS IN ORAL ENGLISH IN ORDER OF FREQUENCY

(None listed below ten)

haven't no, for haven't any	233
seen, had saw	180
ain't, for am not, isn't, aren't	124
done	113
got, ain't got, haven't got	112
I and my brother	96
kin, jist, git, ketch, etc.	91
ain't, for haven't, hasn't	89
Frank and me, for Frank and I	80
is, for are	76
them, for those	75
learn, for teach	71
can, for may	60
my mother she	58
got, for receive, become, grow, is	53
that there	38
don't, for doesn't	36
It was me	36
leave, for let	34
went, for gone	32
come, for came	31
never gave	30
by my aunt's	28
drawed, throwed, growed, knowed, etc.	27
somepin, for something	25
broke, for broken	22
lay, for lie	21
make dinner, for prepare, get	21
says, for said	20
all two, all both	19
readin', nothin', etc.	18
by us, for near us	16
he does it like she does	15
why, and, so, at the beginning of sentence or in middle of sentence	15
that, which, for who and whose	14
onct	12
in back of	12
funny, lots, etc., for queer, many	11
et, for ate	11
run, for ran	11
set, for sit	10

observed, "haven't no" was the error most frequently made, being noted 233 times. An error made less than 10 times among 1,378

children should hardly be considered chronic, nor would it be just to the large majority not making the error to be forced to learn a rule providing for its correction.

TABLE IV
PERCENTAGES OF ERRORS IN EACH GRADE DUE TO EACH OF THE
EIGHT CLASSES OF MISTAKES

CLASSIFICATION OF ERRORS	GRADES						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
1. Verbs.....	44.2	60.0	55.4	54.9	43.3	48.2	49.9
2. Pronouns.....	15.9	14.0	6.7	7.7	12.3	18.8	13.5
3. Negatives.....	11.5	7.1	20.2	7.3	15.2	14.0	11.6
4. Syntactical redundancy.....	8.0	6.6	11.2	12.6	10.5	9.6	9.7
5. Mispronunciations.....	14.7	7.8	2.2	4.9	.....	1.7	8.0
6. Prepositions.....	3.4	3.2	1.8	5.6	4.1	2.6	3.5
7. Adjectives and adverbs.....	2.0	0.6	2.2	6.6	8.2	4.8	3.3
8. Ambiguous expressions.....	.....	.2	.....	.....	.....	.....	.2

Of the total numbers of errors in the third-grade verbs cause 44.2 per cent, etc. In all the grades verbs cause 50 per cent of the errors.

Table IV is compiled from Table II. All the errors reported fall into eight classifications. Of all the errors made by third-grade children, 44.2 per cent were made in the use of verbs. Of all the errors made by all the children, 49.9 per cent, or one-half, were in the use of verbs, the other 50 per cent being scattered over the seven other classifications.

Table IV not only shows that the vast majority of mistakes is in the use of verbs, but that all six grades share fairly equally in the error. The same thing is true, but to a less degree, in the use of pronouns, negatives, syntactical redundancy, prepositions, and adjectives and adverbs. In mispronunciations, evidently the school work is accomplishing results, for 14.7 per cent of words mispronounced in the third grade falls to 1.7 per cent in the eighth. There is a blank in the seventh-grade column. It is certain that mispronunciations occur in the seventh grade, but it is equally certain that they are neither of the glaring type nor of the frequency of the third grade; otherwise they would have been forced upon the attention of the seventh-grade teachers.

Table IV raises the question, Is the only effective work in all our grammar and language teaching being done with mispronounced words? The figures noted for pronouns, etc., suggest a still more discouraging question. More mistakes are made in pronouns in the eighth grade than in any other. Is the present teaching of pronouns leading to a more confused state of mind in the eighth-grade child than existed when he was in the third grade and was entirely unconscious of the rules of grammar governing the use of such words?

Table V gives the violations of grammatical forms of which Cincinnati children are guilty.

TABLE V

VIOLATIONS OF GRAMMATICAL FORMS—IN ORDER OF DECREASING FREQUENCY

VERBS

1. Impossible tense forms, as "ain't, drewed, busted."
2. Use of perfect participle for past tense, and reverse, as "I seen," "I had saw."
3. Use of wrong verb, as "learn" for "teach," "can" for "may."
4. Failure of verb to agree with the subject in number and person, as "There is four," "he don't."
5. Confusion of present and past tenses, as "She come." "He run."
6. Use of verb for noun, as "It doesn't hurt."
7. Incorrect use of mood, as "If it was not for you."
8. Wrong sequence of tenses, as "I have stayed home and had done my work."

PRONOUNS

1. First personal pronoun standing first in a series, as "I and my brother."
2. Accusative pronoun for subject, as "Frank and me went."
3. Use of personal pronoun for demonstrative adjective, as "them things."
4. Predicate nominative not in the nominative case, as "It was me."
5. Use of wrong relative pronoun, "the girl which went."
6. Object of verb or preposition not in the accusative case, as "I know who he saw," "with George and I."
7. Failure of pronoun to agree with its antecedent in number, as "Each of them took their guns."
8. Wrong form of pronoun, as "hissself."
9. Use of pronoun for adverb, as "They are two pens lying there."

NEGATIVES

1. Use of double negative, as "haven't no."
2. Use of negative for auxiliary verb, as "He never gave."

SYNTACTICAL REDUNDANCE

1. In verbs, as "haven't got."
2. In prepositions, as "Where are you at?" "for to keep."
3. In pronouns, as "my mother she said."
4. Miscellaneous, as "they went and took," "all both."

MISPRONUNCIATION

1. ing words, as "nothin'."
2. Words ending in ed, as "scart."
3. Changing of vowels, as "git" for "get"; "kin" for "can."
4. Miscellaneous as "perty," "youse," "liberry."

PREPOSITIONS

1. Wrong preposition, as "I am going by my aunt's."
2. Confusion of preposition and conjunction, as "He does it like she does."

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

1. Confusion of adjective and adverb, "that there book," "He went quick."
2. Misuse of adjective, as "funny" for "queer."
3. Superlative degree for comparative, as "This is the largest of the two."
4. Misuse of adverb, as "awfully" for "very."
5. Double comparison, as "more stronger, worsen."
6. Wrong comparison, as "gooder."
7. Wrong article, as "a" for "an."

AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSION

1. Ambiguous expression, as "a hand and an arm with a sword in it."

An examination of this table shows that almost all these violations are common errors not explained away by grammatical rules. Take the impossible tense form "ain't," for instance. Long before the child has any comprehension of the meaning of grammatical terms, he can be made to understand that there is no such word as "ain't," and can be taught to know the correct form, even if he cannot be taught to use it outside the school room. Of the pronouns, take "I and my brother," for instance. If the grammatical rule that the first personal pronoun must stand last is to help him,

he must wait, to correct the error, until he can understand the terms "first personal pronoun." How much simpler to explain to a third-grade child that politeness requires that he place himself last! Of the double negatives, an analysis of "haven't no" "have not no" will show him the impossibility of the double negative. His ear will generally tell him that "not no" do not go together. Of the syntactical redundance error, take "Where are you at?" The child does not need to know that the preposition "at" requires an object and that the adverb "where" cannot be that object, in order to see that "Where are you?" expresses his idea just as fully and much more tastefully. No grammar pretends to prescribe for mispronunciations. Of the misused prepositions no grammar rule can take the place of ear training in correcting the error "by my aunt's" for "to" or "near my aunt's." Of the misused adjectives and adverbs the grammar is no help in substituting queer for funny, but for such expressions as "he went quick," "worse," "a" for "an," the grammatical rules furnish very definite assistance. Such ambiguous expressions as "a hand and an arm with a sword in it" can hardly be explained away without some technical knowledge of modifiers and their position in a sentence.

Reference to Table IV will show that those grammatical errors dependent on a knowledge of grammar for correction form only a small percentage of the errors made. If, in the total allowance of time for grammar, the percentage of errors made is any guide to the time which should be spent in overcoming these errors, the study of formal grammar would occupy a small part of the total.

TABLE VI

ERRORS SELDOM MADE

1. Incorrect use of mood.
2. Wrong case form of pronoun, as "themselves."
3. Failure of pronoun to agree with its antecedent in number, as "Everybody should do their work."
4. Use of wrong article.
5. Wrong sequence of tenses.
6. Incorrect comparison of adjectives.
7. Use of "laid" for "lay," "give" for "gave."
8. Misplaced modifier.

ERRORS NOT NOTICED OR REPORTED

1. Use of ought with had.
2. Adjective not agreeing in number with the noun it limits as "these kind," "those sort."
3. Use of "and" with the infinitive as "try and go."
4. Wrong inflection of nouns in number.
5. Use of "or" for "nor" as the correlative of neither.
6. "Slang" expressions.

Most of these errors not at all or seldom noticed are provided for by rules in grammar prescribed by the course of study. It would be wrong to assume that because these errors were not noticed they were not made, and that the teaching of the rules governing them is a waste of time and should be eliminated. Many of these errors are made too frequently to be overlooked. It seems that the time to teach the term or principle or correction of error is when it is made.

Unless the purpose of teaching formal grammar is to prepare for the study of a foreign language, we fail to see how the following list of subjects can be of any use to a child in the grades: (1) formal parsing; (2) classification of adverbs and adjectives; (3) the moods; (4) conjugation.

These omissions are suggested that it may be possible to place the stress where it properly belongs, viz., upon correct oral and written speech.

The time devoted to language work should not be decreased, but the character of the work should be changed to meet the real needs of the pupil.